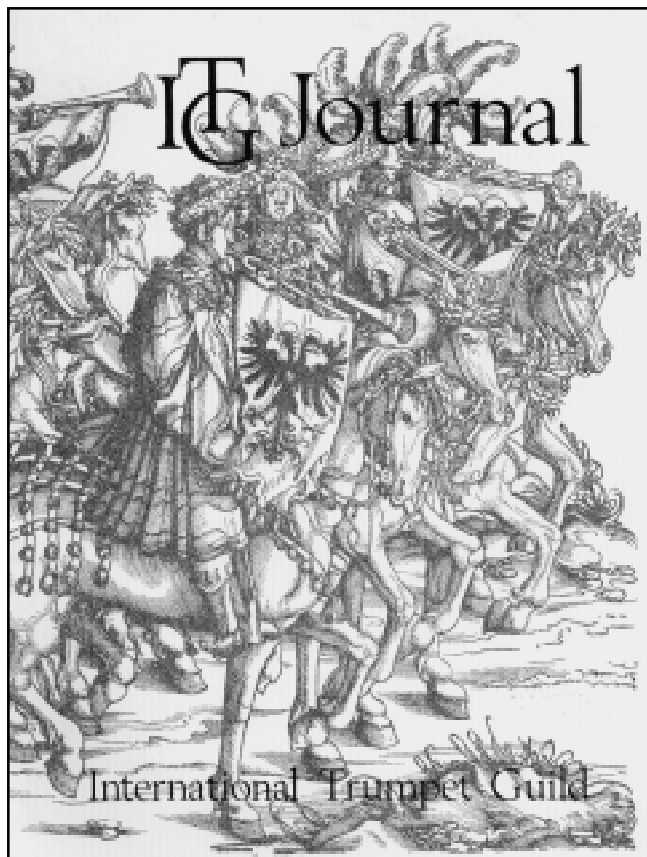


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The Trumpet Concerto of John Williams: From Commission to Concert
– Mary Thornton (May97)



to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet

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The Trumpet Concerto of John Williams: From Commission to Concert

MARY THORNTON

On September 26th, 1996, Michael Sachs, principal trumpet of the Cleveland Orchestra, premiered the *Concerto for Trumpet* by John Williams with Musical Director Christoph von Dohnanyi conducting. The following conversations shed light on what goes on “behind the scenes” as an enormously successful composer approaches writing a concerto for trumpet and as one of the top players of our day endeavors to bring that creation to life.



Michael Sachs

I'd like to work with, he'd do the same, and we'd get back together in a week. At the next meeting, we realized both of us had the same composer at the top of our lists. Tom has known John Williams since his days in Boston and has always wanted to see him write a trumpet concerto. Tom was very excited about the project and promised to do all he could to make it happen. So the genesis of this was Tom's concept.

MT: After Williams agreed to write this piece, how involved were you while he was composing?

MS: I was very fortunate to have quite a bit of interaction with John over a period of approximately two years. He could not have been more gracious, friendly, and professional during the entire process. It was really a lot of fun to get to know him and to see him at work. John started by giving me most of the first movement, an entire second movement, and a few sketches for the beginning of the third movement. Most of our interaction was in Los Angeles and involved me going to his house and playing whatever parts he'd worked through. After our initial meeting, John typically would send a copy of the new material to me

ahead of time, which really helped me prepare an accurate portrayal of the composition for him. He asked me about a wide variety of aspects from technical possibilities to pacing, range, etc. – really the whole spectrum. Many times, he would try out ideas with me on the spot which allowed me to see his train of thought and how the piece took shape. I came to realize very quickly that he picked-up on every nuance. Many times I'd be playing around with a phrase and John would hear an articulation or something I did differently that caught his ear. In the next version it would be in the part, or he'd ask me about it later. So yes, I have to say that I was very touched by the amount of input and interaction I was able to have with him.

MT: As you received sketches, saw the piece forming, and since you have now premiered it, is it what you expected?

MS: Yes, it's exactly what I hoped to see. I've always been struck by John's writing for brass and in particular for trumpet. His writing is very lyrical and powerful with a distinct style that shows off the instrument at it's best. When Tom and I first discussed the idea, we really wanted to have something that filled a gap we saw in the repertoire. We were looking to John to create a great 20th century American trumpet concerto – a strong piece with tonal framework, soaring lyricism and vibrant flair, yet accessible for both the audience and performer. There are a number of terrific recent concertos, but we were really after something different that we knew John could offer. Unfortunately, Copland only got as far as *Quiet City* and Barber as far as his *Capricorn Concerto*, with neither being a complete solo vehicle for the trumpet. We saw John as the perfect composer to fill this need. His writing for this concerto has all the qualities that make John's music so distinctive and attractive. There are many styles portrayed throughout the work – dramatic, rhapsodic, intervallic, reflective, declamatory, etc. It spans the entire spectrum of range (low F-sharp to high D), dynamics, and character.

MT: Once you had the complete concerto in hand, what preparation challenges did the piece present, and was your approach different than usual?

MS: Luckily, I had most of the work about six months before the premiere. Since I'd been living with the initial sketches for the better part of a year before that, I wasn't really being caught by surprise. This was a nice luxury to have for my preparation.



John Williams and Michael Sachs

However, there were several preparation challenges. I knew I had to be in extremely strong overall shape so there would be no endurance or technique issues. This included a lot of fundamental work (Arban, Schlossberg, Clarke, Rochut, etc.) to compliment technical and musical aspects that the concerto included.

Because there were so many styles to execute, I started very early on to methodically take each section and work through it as meticulously as possible. I tried to pay extremely close attention to John's markings which are very clear in the part. I also asked a lot of questions to understand as deeply as possible what character and emotions John truly wanted portrayed. I also thought a lot about each section to have a strong idea of exactly how I wanted it to come off. I didn't want anything to be haphazard so I really took my time figuring out the phrasing and shape of each line, as well as the technical demands.

As soon as I received a piano reduction and score, I started to work with a pianist to see how everything worked in context and to get an idea of how it all fit together. I did a performance of the piece for a small group of 40 people in Los Angeles three weeks before the premiere. I wanted to test things as well as get John's feedback as to whether I was doing what he hoped to hear. It gave me a great sense for the performance feel and pacing before performing it with the orchestra. It also gave me the opportunity to play it for my parents who, unfortunately, were too ill to come to Cleveland. I basically had the piece memorized, though I still used the part during the performances.

When it finally came to the performances, I felt very comfortable knowing exactly what I wanted to do with the entire piece. This gave me a lot of confidence and kept negative variables, like indecision or nerves, from being factors. I could just relax and enjoy the moment.

MT: Once you began rehearsing with the orchestra were there any problems fitting everything together?

MS: In front of the orchestra, it all came together very easily. John is a master at orchestration so everything fit together smoothly. And I had a good idea what to expect from the piano reduction and score. Still, it was pretty outrageous to hear the piece in total for the first time. It's always a rush the first time you get up front and hear the sound coming from behind you, especially on a piece like this where the orchestration is very full and strong. Haydn and Hummel are one thing, but this kind of sound supporting you is very powerful and fun. It also helped to perform this with a conductor like Dohnanyi. Collaborating with someone that strong, who also happens to be my boss and with whom I enjoy a friendly relationship, made it very comfortable. Dohnanyi, John, Tom Morris, and the orchestra were all incredibly supportive. It was nice to have that feeling behind me.

MT: What was your initial reaction when the Cleveland Orchestra contacted you about writing a trumpet concerto?

JW: Of course, I was thrilled to have this commission opportunity because it gave me a chance to write a concerto for an instrument that I really love. I played brass instruments as a youngster and was very interested in them as a kid growing up. It also offered the privilege of having it premiered by Michael Sachs and the fabulous Cleveland Orchestra, one of the world's best. I would describe Michael as one of the world's most elegant trumpet players. So, I was thrilled.

MT: That leads to another question. You can certainly hear in the parts you write that you have a tremendous understanding of what works for the trumpet, I wondered if that was due to any previous experience as a player.

JW: When I was a youngster growing up in the 1940s I was very aware of the influences of the great swing band brass players. I will almost quote what I wrote for the publication of this concerto. I believe that for certain kinds of trumpet playing, everyone since Louis Armstrong owes him a lot. In the 30s and 40s there were players like Harry James and Tommy Dorsey who really expanded the expressive capabilities of brass instruments. There hadn't been anything in concert music that really had given us that kind of cantabile, expressive extension that these people introduced. Except for the great baroque school

of brass playing and military band traditions in England and France, there was nothing as influential in the popular field as these players at that time. I wanted to get in on this as a kid.

I was a serious piano student and my father, who was a professional musician, said to me, "You can have a trombone as long as you continue your piano studies." He got me the trombone and arranged for lessons with two very famous teachers at the time, Robert Palucci and Bill Atkinson. Palucci was a very well-known trombonist in New York City. He played, I think, in the CBS and NBC orchestras at various times. Bill Atkinson taught many of the great West Coast trombone players. So, as a serious piano student and semi-serious brass student, I studied trombone and taught myself to play trumpet. I could switch from the trombone to the trumpet but switching mouthpiece sizes bothered me. I really couldn't cope with that [laughs], so my amateur-level brass playing career was mainly trombone – I also played some tuba. I gave this up of course, after my teenage years, when I went on to more serious studies of writing and piano and so on, but as a youngster I did have this brass background.

MT: Had you thought of writing a trumpet concerto before? Did you have ideas in mind that you always wanted to try?

JW: No, I had written concertos for other instruments.

MT: Yes, the tuba concerto was performed by the Cleveland Orchestra and Ronald Bishop as well.

JW: Yes, that's right. Also, I have written a clarinet concerto, a cello concerto for Yo-Yo Ma that we performed together with the Boston Symphony, a violin concerto, and a lot of orchestral, band, and ceremonial music featuring brass. I've also written a lot for brass in my film scores, but never a trumpet concerto. A lot of people have asked me for a horn concerto but nobody ever asked for a trumpet concerto. Well, years ago Doc Severinsen asked me to write a more "popular" concerto for him, but I never got around to it. I love Doc's playing, he's a great player. This commission was just timely. As I said earlier, the combination of the honor and privilege of working with the Cleveland Orchestra and Michael Sachs was enough impetus to make it happen.

MT: How would you describe the concerto in terms of form and harmony?

JW: It's in three movements, which I suppose is a classical or romantic configuration in the European sense. Very roughly speaking the movements are fast-slow-fast.

The first movement's harmonic idiom is very nearly

tonal; by contemporary standards it is very traditional in this sense. Certainly, its harmonic language is not that of jazz, but it can't be called a post-serialist piece in any sense. I wanted to give the trumpet an opportunity to sing, a kind of cantabile expression that was almost vocal. I don't know if the harmonic idiom is particularly American or influenced by jazz or the previously mentioned dance band trumpeters. Other musicologists might be able to tell us. What I was looking for was the opportunity for the

trumpet to sing, and that isn't a particularly dodecaphonic kind of harmonic expression. It led me more into a tonal, American romantic idiom if you like, though not a popular idiom.

The first movement begins with fanfares for the solo trumpet and orchestral trumpets, all the trumpets are playing fanfares. It's a typical heraldic, flag-waving, almost military music of trumpet, all very traditional with a big cadenza at the end.

The first movement segues into the second movement with no break. The second movement is cantabile with its vocal, lyrical, and hopefully warm harmonic atmosphere.

The finale is a technical showpiece with dramatic double and triple tonguing, scales, arpeggios, leaps, and all the great theatrics a great trumpeter can provide.

So I put together the piece in this way: traditional aspects of military and ceremonial in the first movement, the lyrical singing aspect of the trumpet in the second, and the athletic aspect in the third.

I thought the harmonic idiom, which is very nearly tonal, was the right vehicle of expression. The score shows off the orchestra as well. The orchestral trumpets compete with the solo trumpet – they try to top each other.

MT: The conclusion of the cadenza, when the three orchestral trumpets and the soloist chase each other around rather furiously, is an example of that.

JW: Right. They all get into the competition, and they all show what they've got. I think that makes for good theatre also. I think we need that in a brass concerto. It's hard to hold an audience's interest for 20-25 minutes with a wind instrument concerto. That's the history of this problem for all composers from Mozart's time to our own. The employment of theatrical elements, not only helps the audience but it gives the artist a chance to show off all the aspects of their character, the more private, more introspective, more reflective moments alongside the athletic, technical things they can do.

MT: Mike spoke to the fact that he was very happy about the level of interaction between the two of you

I think with all musicians we don't work in a vacuum and we need each other: players and writers and conductors and audiences.

while you wrote the concerto. Do you find it important to have a performer's input as you write?

JW: It certainly is. I would say any composer would admit that. In my case, with brass instruments, I know them better than I know some other instruments. For example, I've always studied the string instruments assiduously. But while working on my string concertos, an expert string player instructed me on fingerings, bowings, double-stop combinations, and so on. I always learn and am inspired by this kind of connection. My experience with Michael was particularly good, because he's a very serious young man and prepares very, very methodically. He came to see me in California a half-dozen times. I started by writing little fragments and having him play them for me to get a sense of what I could do, what fit him, what he could do, and what he was comfortable doing. I didn't want to give him a whole series of challenges that were beyond healthy. Not to say the work is facile or easy in any way.

MT: Definitely not.

JW: [Laughter] I wanted it to be characteristic and enjoyable to play. I think with all musicians we don't work in a vacuum and we need each other: players and writers and conductors and audiences. For much of my nearly 40 years of experience in the film industry, I've worked alone in a room (I'm calling now from my studio at Universal). Much of a composer's life is spent that way. So when we can work with performing artists or get out and perform in public, whether the musicians are professionals or amateurs, that's the real juice of music, that's what turns us on. Ultimately, that's what inspires us.

MT: You mentioned publishing plans for the concerto, who will be the publisher and when will it be available?

JW: Hal Leonard has prepared a beautiful edition for piano and trumpet that Michael has very successfully performed already. It worked very well in that idiom although I wrote it first for orchestra and trumpet and then reduced it. Naturally one loses some things. For example, the trumpet quartet in the first movement. Michael and I were both surprised at how well it worked in the piano/trumpet idiom.

It will also be available in the trumpet and orchestra version. I think the Rodgers & Hammerstein library is the rental agent.

MT: I'm convinced there will be interest.

JW: That would be wonderful! I was enormously pleased in Cleveland because the orchestra liked the piece, the audience liked it, and the critics liked it. We seldom get all three of those to agree positively. I was quipping to Michael that I wondered what we

had done wrong with this piece. I hasten to add that this kind of critical acknowledgment is not really what keeps us going. If people want to be critical of it, I also think that's part of the game and part of the fun of it. I just hope that brass people will enjoy this work and that students will get something from it. I

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think anybody who hears Michael play it is going to be instructed and inspired. He's an especially elegant player. There are some wonderful trumpeters around the country, and Michael ranks way up there in

the pantheon of these people.

MT: Are there plans to do a recording?

JW: We want to, and I'd like to do it sooner than later. However, the climate for recording concert works these days makes it very difficult.

MT: Are you working on anything else right now?

JW: I'm working on a cycle of songs for the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. for the rededication of the Kennedy Center in October, 1997. It's based on texts by Rita Dove, the wonderful, former poet laureate. She's a great artist and these songs will be sung by Kathleen Battle. I have two film scores with Mr. Spielberg this year. The first is *The Lost World* which is the sequel to *Jurassic Park*. I'll start that in about three weeks – it will have a lot of brass. [Laughs]

MT: I don't think I'm alone when I say that hearing your film scores growing up, and even today, was and still is inspiring. I saw *Star Wars* for the first time just when it was time to choose instruments in school and the next thing you know I had a trumpet in my hands.

JW: That's the nice thing about film. We do reach a lot of people. The other thing is that I have such fabulous players. For *Star Wars* we had Maurice Murphy and the London Symphony. On some films out here we have Malcolm McNab who is brilliant, and Tim Morrison comes out from Boston to play on some soundtracks. We're able to gather up the greatest trumpeters around. I'm leaving out so many names but it's a who's who in the brass world out here. It's such wonderful fun.

MT: So as you sat in Cleveland's Severance Hall on the big night what were your thoughts?

JW: It was a wonderful experience! I couldn't have wished for a better hall, a better conductor, or a finer soloist – it was wonderful!

About the Author: Mary Thornton is a member of Quantum Brass, a quintet currently based in East Texas as a participant in Chamber Music America's Rural Residency Program.